

CHAPTER 5: Foster Parent and Family Self Care

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FOSTER PARENT AND FAMILY SELF CARE

Foster parenting is a rewarding and – at the same time - difficult and demanding job. Fostering brings many new experiences and challenges which may affect not only the foster child and foster parents but also the entire family. In order to ensure the best possible care for the child, it is important for families to identify their stress levels and make the case worker know if they are feeling overwhelmed.

Effects of Fostering on the Family:

You need to take care of your needs and the needs of your birth and adoptive children just as you would take care of the needs of a child placed in your home through foster care. It takes time to adjust to the arrival of a child and the change of the family structure.

The child from foster care often arrives without the preparation that surrounds the birth of a sibling. The phone call, your decision, and the arrival of the child can all occur within a few hours. The child may be close in age (actual age or developmental level) to your birth or adopted child, and mixed emotions may arise.

The entire family needs to incorporate the child into family activities to help the child to feel cared for and secure. At the same time, it is acceptable for you to request respite care, a break from fostering, for a short time. For more information on respite, refer to the next section. Some families choose to take short “time-outs” between foster care placements in their home to re-group as a family.

You may sometimes worry about the behavior of the child from foster care and the influence of that behavior on the birth or adopted children, especially if they are young or impressionable. Patience and understanding regarding the child’s life experiences can help with these concerns. The experience of fostering children may quite possibly have unexpected positive effects on all children in the home.

Children who worry about what happens to the children in foster care when they leave may need additional reassurance. They may need to be told that it’s okay to grieve the loss of their foster brother or sister. Many foster parents keep an album of photographs of children who have been part of their family.

Ways in which Foster Parents Encounter Loss and Grief

You and your family may not expect feelings of grief or loss after a child leaves your home. But you have invested in the child in a multitude of ways, and, as the child moves on, the family loses the unique relationship that they had with that child.

Foster parents may be experience feelings of grief and loss in a variety of ways:

- ❖ Grief felt by the birth parents when a child is removed
- ❖ Feelings of loss felt by the child separated from his or her parents
- ❖ Personal grief when their foster child is reunified with their birth family or placed in another foster or adoptive home
- ❖ Grief of other members of the foster family when the child moves
- ❖ Grief over the abuse or neglect experienced by the child

A grieving person may feel depressed, anxious, or angry and be consumed by yearning for the lost child; have difficulty concentrating; cry; exhibit restlessness; have trouble sleeping; avoid social contact and intimacy and experience appetite disturbance and fatigue. These symptoms may be distressing to you and your family, especially if the grief is unexpected.

Although the move of a child may be a deeply emotional time for you, it is potentially an opportunity for growth and change. You can use your own feelings of grief to build empathy for what birth parents feels when a child is removed, and for the losses of the children.

Tips for dealing with grief and loss:

- ❖ Connect with foster care/adoption support groups
- ❖ Use respite providers as necessary
- ❖ Allow time to grieve the loss of the child
- ❖ Think about taking a short break from fostering every now and then
- ❖ Get involved in activities unrelated to foster care

Coping and Support

Foster parenting and supporting kids with special needs demands an enormous amount of time and energy. It is important to continually evaluate whether these demands can be managed and when to ask for help.

Each of us gives and receives support in a unique way. The ways we are most comfortable giving support may not be the same ways we like to receive support. We may be able to give support to a friend or relative through a vote of confidence (a you can do it) while at the same time when we need support this type of support may not match the need we are having at that moment. To identify the type of support you give and like to receive it might be useful to take a few moments to discuss it with someone closest to you.

Things to think about and discuss with someone you trust:

- ❖ How do I receive support?
- ❖ Who is one of my most supportive friends or family members?
- ❖ How do I give support?
- ❖ To whom do I give support?
- ❖ Do I have as many people to support me as the number of people I support?

Remember, in order to take care of our children, we need to take care of ourselves. Positive self-care is essential for enriching our own lives as well as empowering the lives of everyone in your family.

When to ask for help

In order for you can continue to provide good care for the foster child, it is important to let the child's case worker or the foster care coordinator know if your family is overly stressed by the behavior of the foster child in your home.

It is your right and responsibility to keep the agency informed and request assistance when needed.

Respite Care

Respite, which is the temporary placement of the foster child with another family for a day or weekend, can be used to offer foster parents a much-needed break. Most parents take breaks away from their children – to go shopping, see a movie, get away for a night, or just do nothing at all. You, too, should know that you need breaks from your responsibilities.

Each agency handles respite care in different ways. It is important for foster families to “build” their own system of supportive caregivers that can provide care for a foster child when needed.

Support Groups and Associations

There are a variety of support groups and associations both across the state and nationally that can provide foster parents with support and information. Included below is information about support groups and foster parent associations, including what they are and how foster parents can find out if they are available in their area.

Support Groups:

A support group is a network of foster parents who come together to share ideas, experiences, and concerns related to their children. It's a non-threatening way for families to talk about the joys and frustrations that come with being foster parents. These groups may meet in person, through newsletters, online, or by telephone.

In some groups, the focus is on sharing among foster parents. In others it is on advocacy. Still others focus on education and training. Each group may combine all of these at one time or another.

Some foster parents benefit from sharing ideas and discussing with other foster parents who understand their experiences. It is important to remember that information about a foster child or birth family must be kept confidential. You can discuss challenges in a general way without getting too specific about an individual child or family.

Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parents Association (WFAPA)

The Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (WFAPA) is statewide organization dedicated to supporting foster and adoptive parents. WFAPA prints a quarterly newsletter containing legislative updates, articles addressing foster care, a calendar of upcoming events, and information about their spring and fall conferences. WFAPA conferences are a great way for foster parents to obtain education and training and to get support and encouragement from fellow foster parents.

For more information about WFAPA, visit their web site at: www.wfapa.org

Some counties also have local foster parent associations, sometimes called FAPAs. Check with your Foster Care Coordinator to find out if there is a local association in your area.

National Foster Parent Association:

The National Foster Parent Association (NFPA) is the only national organization striving to support foster parents and is an advocate on behalf of all children. Membership in the NFPA is open to anyone interested in improving the foster care system and enhancing the lives of children and families.

The NFPA hosts an annual conference and offers a variety of information on their web site.

Membership in the NFPA is open to anyone interested in improving the foster care system and enhancing the lives of children and families.

For more information about the NFPA, visit their web site at www.nfpainc.org or call 1-800-557-5238.

For more information about other support groups, associations and resources available in Wisconsin talk to your foster care coordinator or contact the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center for assistance.

Knowledge is Powerful

This handbook only gave a general overview of various topics areas. It is important to consider looking further into the areas discussed in this handbook. In addition to receiving support and insight from other foster parents, seeking additional information can be very beneficial to you. Researching pertinent topics can help you as you work to understand and support the needs of the children placed in your home.

Some helpful topics may include:

- ❖ Effects of child abuse and neglect
- ❖ Managing and working with children with behavioral, emotional or physical challenges
- ❖ Reactive Attachment Disorder
- ❖ Cross cultural parenting
- ❖ Working with Special Education
- ❖ Post traumatic Stress Disorder as well as other mental health disorders
- ❖ Working with Children with sexualized behavior

The Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center has an extensive library covering these topics and many more. Your local library and the internet also have many pieces of information covering foster care related topics and issues.

Chapter 5- Key Points to Remember:

- ❖ In order to ensure the best possible care for the child, it is important for families to identify their stress levels and let the case worker know if they are feeling overwhelmed.
- ❖ The experience of fostering children may quite possibly have unexpected positive effects on all children in the home.
- ❖ Although the move of a child may be a deeply emotional time for you, it is potentially an opportunity for growth and change.
- ❖ It is important to continually evaluate whether the demands of fostering can be managed and when to ask for help
- ❖ It is your right and responsibility to keep the agency informed and request assistance when needed.
- ❖ A support group is a network of foster parents who come together to share ideas, experiences, and concerns related to their children.
- ❖ An association is typically an organization that strives to support foster parents and is an advocate on behalf of all children.
- ❖ Researching pertinent topics can help you as you work to understand and support the needs of the children placed in your home.